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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 001109

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/02/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: SHERZAI AIDE CLAIMS KARZAI STRONG-ARMS SHERZAI OUT  
OF THE RACE

REF: KABUL 172

Classified By: Acting DCM Alan Yu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Nangarhar Governor Gul Aga Sherzai withdrew from the presidential race on May 2, the day after a reportedly lengthy and emotional meeting with President Karzai. Sherzai's campaign manager alleged that Karzai's increasingly emotional and threatening tone pushed Sherzai to end his candidacy. If true, Karzai's actions would run counter to his assurances not to interfere with opponents wishing to challenge him. Sherzai has also apparently submitted his resignation as governor, though Karzai issued a statement refusing to accept the resignation. Sherzai's withdrawal took many by surprise, especially after word leaked late on May 1 that Sherzai had convinced current First Vice President Ahmed Zia Massoud to join his ticket. Sherzai's departure from the campaign, if it holds, will help Karzai consolidate support in the south and east, and further dash opposition candidates' hopes either to merge their campaigns or split off enough votes from Karzai to force a second round of balloting. End Summary.

Moments Away From Registering, Sherzai Steps Back

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¶2. (C) Sherzai's campaign manager, Lower House MP Khalid Pashtun (Kandahar, Pashtun), called PolOff early on May 2 to report that Sherzai had fended off an aggressive lobbying effort by Karzai to push him out of the race. Instead, Sherzai had signed deals with First Vice President Massoud and former Herat Governor Sayed Hussain Anwari to join his ticket, and planned to register his candidacy later that day. However, later that day Sherzai reversed course and decided not only to end his unofficial campaign, but also to resign his position as governor. Sherzai made the announcement in a surprise appearance before media in Kabul May 2, then quickly departed for Jalalabad. The Palace later released a statement welcoming Sherzai's withdrawal, but refusing to accept his resignation as governor.

¶3. (C) Pashtun said Karzai learned on May 1 of Sherzai's imminent plans to register and quickly invited Sherzai and Pashtun to dinner at the Palace. For three hours, Karzai argued several rationales for Sherzai to leave the race, citing Sherzai's lack of support in the international community and a series of recent tribal meetings in Kandahar and Helmand that resulted in more endorsements for Karzai than Sherzai. Karzai also predicted a campaign with two strong Pashtun candidates would spark political violence among tribes in the south and east. Khalid Pashtun alleged that Karzai's tone changed from diplomatic, to angry, to desperate, to threatening. The suddenness of his mood swings reportedly left most guests silent.

¶4. (C) Pashtun said Sherzai rebuffed Karzai's reasoning and insisted on remaining in the race. Karzai's words grew more personal and direct. Pashtun reported that Sherzai finally stood up and declared that he needed to leave the room. As the dinner broke up, Pashtun pressed Karzai's aides to

explain Karzai's odd behavior. Urban Development Minister Pashtun, who like Khalid Pashtun and Sherzai is from the Barakzai tribe, said Karzai was feeling increasingly confident in his chances for re-election and now plotted not just to win, but to win on his own terms ) a clear first round victory with the vice presidents and Cabinet of his choice.

#### Supporters Shocked By Sudden Exit

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15. (C) Pashtun said Sherzai decided to withdraw from the race after calculating that Karzai's extreme behavior foreshadowed the lengths to which he would bully his competition during the official campaign. Sherzai believed he had more popular support than Karzai, but reportedly determined he could not compete with Karzai's expected exploitation of government resources to aid his campaign. In earlier conversations with us, Sherzai has raised the issue of his personal safety should he become a presidential candidate (reftel), suggesting that officials loyal to Karzai would threaten him or his allies. Pashtun argued Karzai would not run a fair campaign, though Pashtun had urged Sherzai to stay in the race to save face among his many followers. Pashtun claimed he had received more than 300 calls from supporters asking Sherzai to reconsider shortly after Sherzai's announcement.

16. (SBU) PRT Jalalabad reported that several hundred Sherzai supporters congregated around the governor's compound in Jalalabad on May 2, awaiting Sherzai's return from Kabul. Some supporters, who praised the progress on security and

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infrastructure development during Sherzai's tenure in Nangarhar, told the PRT they would not accept any replacements in the governor's office. In Kabul, where Sherzai also enjoys support among working-class residents, news of his withdrawal spread through talk radio and word-of-mouth. Several Kabulis expressed disbelief that Karzai had vanquished what they saw as his chief foe so easily. Others hoped for a future reconciliation, preferably one that resulted in Sherzai's appointment as Kabul's governor.

#### Campaign Negotiations Grow More Serious

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17. (C) We anticipate this to be just the first of many interesting stories to develop this week as the May 8 candidate registration deadline draws closer. Sherzai's exit is not just a win for Karzai, but also a loss for the opposition. Other candidates had courted Sherzai for their own tickets, while others had counted on him to draw votes from Karzai in his home province of Kandahar and force a second round. Now, it appears Sherzai will sit out the race on the sidelines. Karzai remains in the driver's seat, though with a half-dozen serious challengers still waiting to jump in the race, nothing is certain yet.

18. (C) Pashtun's claims feed further to the protests from the opposition over Karzai's strong arm tactics. There is a line between rough and tumble politics and unfair political action. We will continue to make clear to Karzai that we are watching this space closely and will expect him to abide by his assurances not to interfere with opponents wishing to challenge him.

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